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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School for American Crafts
Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
In Metals and Jewelry Design

Dreamland:

by

Xiaohe Shen

May 14, 2015

Signature Page

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Date: _____

I. **Proposal and Abstract**

I was attracted by the interaction between dream and reality. Not long before I started my thesis, I read Freud's book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and it quite interested me. In Freud's theory, the complete personality is composed of id, ego and super-ego. The id is the set of coordinated instinctual trends; the super-ego plays the critical and moralizing role; and the ego is the organized, realistic part that mediates between the desires of the id and the super-ego. The super-ego can stop one from doing certain things that one's id may want to do. These three parts dominate a human's mental life, including dreaming. Dreams have the power of censorship, which occurs when the super-ego tries to suppress the id. Freud thought the essence of the dream is the fulfillment of wishes; wishes that come from people's instinctive desires without disguise. However, not all wishes are reasonable and achievable. To pass the censor and fulfill unreasonable wishes in a dream, a human's brain has to put on a disguise. This is why most dreamlands look absurd, but with deep exploration, one will find out the hint of those covered wishes.

The relationship between dream and reality is similar to that of a mirror and reflection. In my work, I wanted to create an environment that would depict the interaction between dreams and reality. I wished to give viewers the experience of feeling the abstract definition of "dreamland," instead of a specific view of a particular dreamland.

I chose painting and installation work as the format to build the "Dreamland" environment because visual plays a big part in dreams and painting is the best and most straightforward way to access the visual sense. Installation work has rich expressive capacity and can be suitable for representing abstract ideas. I also saw installation work as one of the current most popular art forms, so I wanted to try it in my final school project.

II. Discussion of sources and research

According to Freud's view, dreams are all about "wish fulfillment" and trying to use unconsciousness to sort out conflicts from different parts of mind. However, since information in the unconscious state is in an unruly and often disturbing form, a "censor" in the preconscious will not allow it to pass unaltered into the conscious. During a dream, the preconscious is more lax in this duty than in working hours, but is still attentive: Meaning in the unconscious state has been twisted and altered so that it can pass through censorship. As such, images in dreams are often not what they appear to be, and need deeper interpretation if they are to inform us on the structures of the unconscious.

To interpret information from dreams, Freud proposed the "phenomenon of condensation," the idea that one simple symbol or image presents multiple meanings in a dream. I looked at it as the symbolism of dreams.

Freud did not give a clear definition of symbolism. In general, from his point of view, there is a kind of constant, one to one relationship between the symbol and the symbolic item. In his book *Introductory Lectures On Psychoanalysis* he put "the fixed relationship between dream's element and the interpretation of dream" as a symbolism relationship. And dream's element is actually the symbol of the latent dream thought. Freud and his students thought that in most cases alternative objects are generated unconsciously from the defense mechanism; that symbolism and symbolic activities are the result of a compromise between suppressor and suppressed. "Only the suppressed things are symbolized, and only the suppressed things need to be symbolized" said one of Freud's students.

Therefore, in this thesis I also wished to apply symbolism. I was impressed by Robert Smithson's mirror installation works. I first saw his *Gravel Mirrors with Cracks and Dust* in Dia museum. He set twelve mirrors with their right angles by the corner of wall, and placed six piles of gravel in front of them. In the neat, clean showroom, the rough texture and organic shape of the gravel piles contrasted with the polished floor, but their gray hue complemented the dark khaki wood of the mirror frames. When audiences walked by the mirrors, from certain angles their images appeared next to the



Robert Smithson *Gravel Mirrors with Cracks and Dust*

gravel piles, although in reality they and the gravel were in different spots. This space arrangement inspired me. Smithson made audiences part of his work so both could experience each other. He has said of his mirror works: "What you are really confronted with in a nonsite is the absence of the site . . . a ponderous and weighty absence." The nonsite becomes an abstraction, a mapping source, which references the real/actual site from which materials are taken. Smithson further states, ". . . I created a dialectic of site and nonsite. The nonsite exists as a kind of deep three-dimensional abstract map that points to a specific site on the surface of the earth . . . designated by a kind of mapping procedure." I think the nonsite cannot only refer to a real/actual site, but also to that of the inner world. In contrast to the relatively stable real site, people's inner world is flowing all the time. The captured site from dreamland is not a permanent landmark of the inner world; it is the milestone of a certain moment. And the site from the inner world is already an abstract existence. Recording a site from dream is similar to actualizing an abstraction. However, it is hard to accurately depict an abstraction. Therefore, symbolism becomes a possible solution.

In the study of contemporary art, two artists attracted my attention: Robert Mangold and Agnes Martin. Both of them are minimalists, and their works made me think of using clean and as few as possible geometric elements to convey mass information/emotion. Mangold's works are basically composed of large-volume flat colors and perfect geometric patterns shaped by fine lines. The content of his work has a subtle con-

nection to the edge of the canvas. This connection. gives me a feeling of edging over-flow power in his painting, that is softly stopped by the brim.

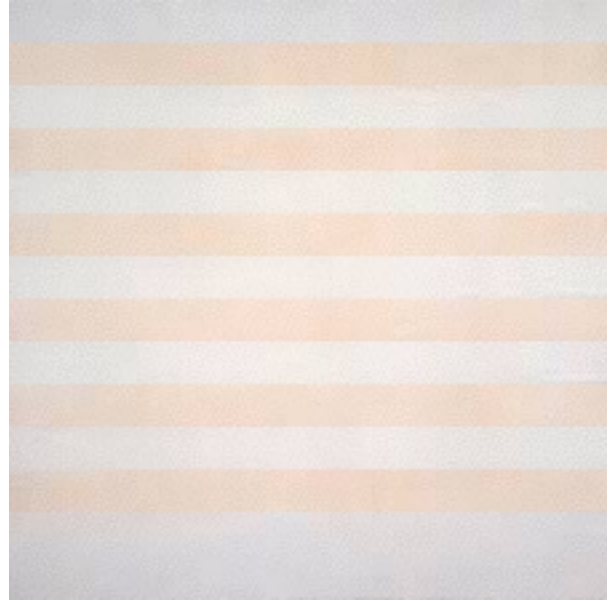


When I first saw Agnes Martin's work, I felt it was hard to comprehend. But somehow I had a memory of her light color rectangles. After I read more about her work, I began to understand it. When I saw her pieces later, I felt I was looking at a landscape rather than geometric shapes. They are the very abstracted ideas from the artist. There is no certain interpretation. The most correct way to decipher her work could be to let the images enter your mind and see what information they will transmit. As Agnes said,

“Art is responded to with emotion.”¹ This idea made me think about how I could start my work: The best way to do so was to record my daydream.



Agnes Martin *Between the Lines*



Agnes Martin *Falling Blue*

Coming back to *Dreamland*: According to Freud, all of the human's motivation comes from the instinctive desire, including artistic creation. The creation is the way that artists use to fulfill their fantasy, and human's illusion is formed by human's practice desire. The essence of illusion is the perceptual revelation of desire that is suppressed during the practical process. To artists, the process of creation is similar to the daydream. Freud said “ When science successfully explains the distortion of dream, it won't be hard for us to understand the night dream and daydream - which is well known as fantasy - both are the fulfillment of willingness. ”² Therefore, I would start *Dreamland*: with recording my fantasy.

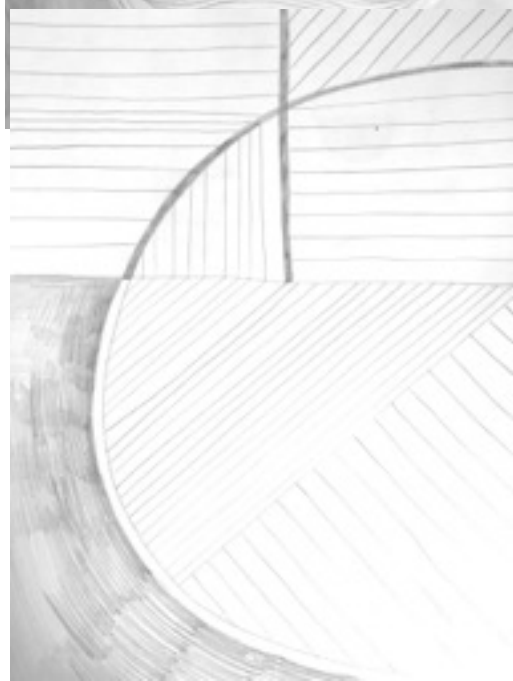
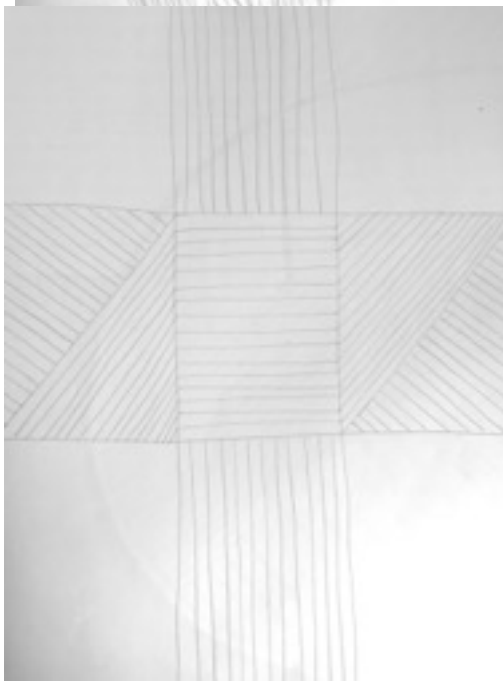
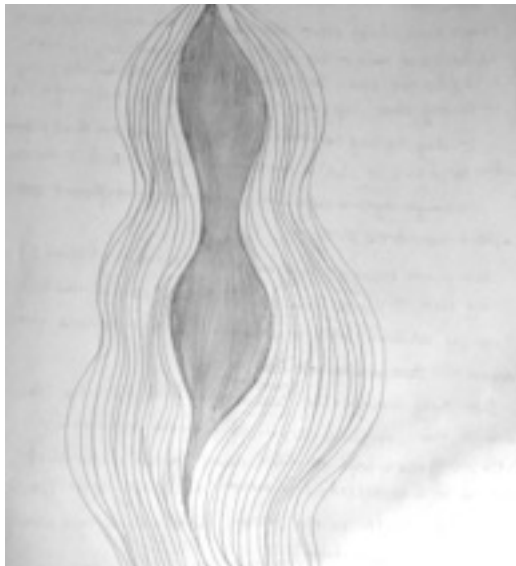
¹ Maria Popova, *Iconic painter Agnes Martin on Art, Solitude, and the Secret of Happiness*

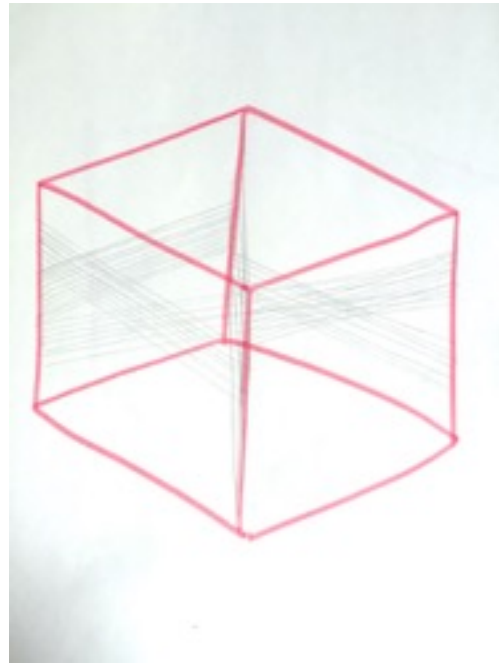
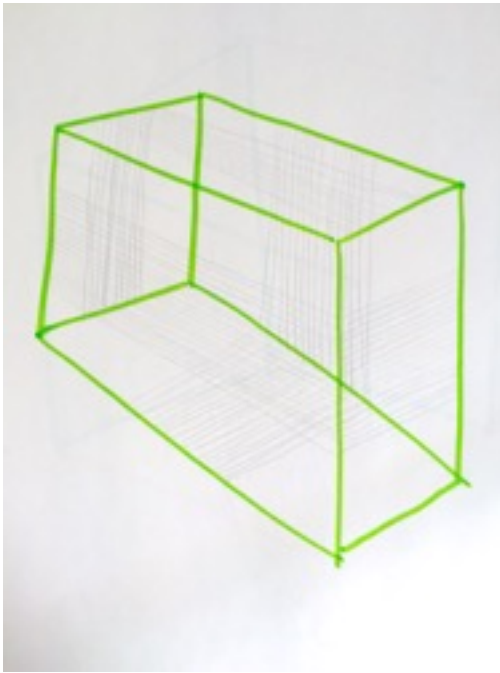
² Sigmund Freud. *Writing on Art and Literature*

III. Critical analysis

I started my recording with small sketches. At the beginning, the whole theory had been just a blurry idea. After I drew more and more sketches, it became clearer.

My original sketches were mostly circles and free shapes, without particular arrangement. Gradually, I found that I preferred to draw straight parallel lines. And the straight lines looked simpler and more elegant on the paper. On the surface, different line arrangements showed subtle comparison between the different patterns.





Model 1

After a while I felt that I encountered a bottleneck. I started to build some models with cardboard and sheets of plastic and aluminum. I used cardboard to structure an empty cube, put aluminum sheets on the inside wall, and hung the cut plastic with a drawing in the cube. I wanted to create a small environment, so I used the cardboard

cube as a small version of the 3-D space, and chose aluminum to imitate the effect of a mirror. Though it was not a perfect alternative, low cost and flexibility made it a suitable material for a model. The idea of including mirrors was inspired by Robert Smithson's installation works. Though a mirror doesn't create another dimension, it extends the length of the axis in certain space. It also creates a comparison between falsity and truth, illusion and reality. I felt that between dream and real life, there is a similar comparison.

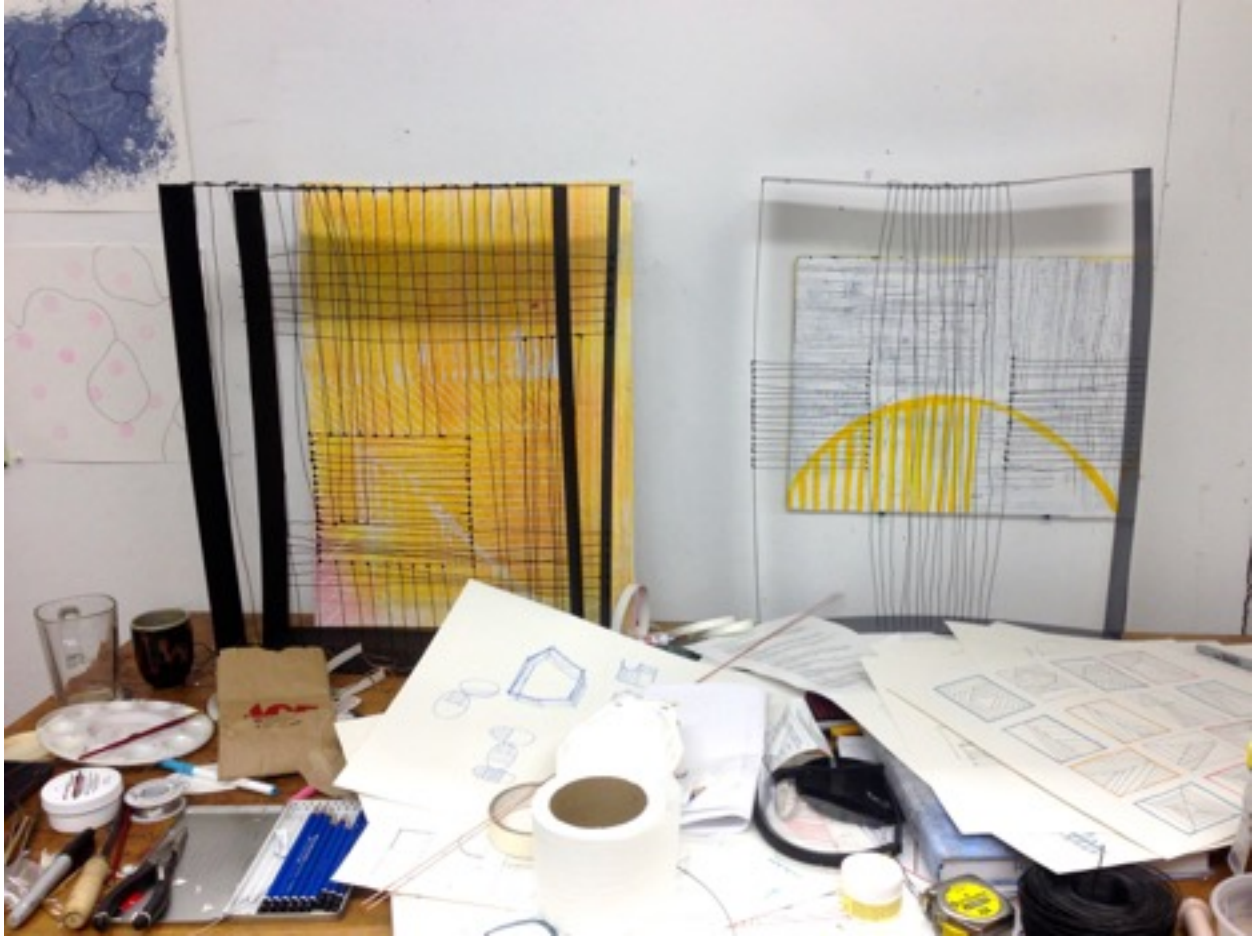


Cardboard model

First, I drew some sketches on the plastic, cut it into a balloon shape, and hung it in the cardboard box so the sketch would look like it was floating in mid-air. The painted cardboard and transparent line drawing made an interesting combination, with the thick black lines on the plastic sheet and the subtle scratch lines on the background forming a comparison. They were isolated, but within the same space, spoke with each other. The idea of a floating line drawing made me think of developing it into metal craft. I had seen a concept of furniture design in which wool was used to form the outline of home decor. The entire set looked like a three-dimensional hand drawing. I started to use copper wire and steel to build the simple model.

The first metal model I made was based on my sketches. I tried to make all of the lines as straight, neat and tight as the drawing. However, the single copper wires were too soft to hold by itself, and the steel sheets I used to make the frame were too thin to support the tension when I tried to tighten the copper wires. When the first model was

Steel model



done and I compared it with my drawings, I found that the curves had a rough hand-drawn appearance. Since the lines were not tightened, there was some delicate movement within them. The imperfection became the inspiration, as if the work was speaking for itself. So I decided to keep those hand-drawn elements in the next stage.



Painting test

While I was forming the metal model, I also started to do some small acrylic paintings. The thickness of the acrylic gave the line drawing more volume, as well as more combinations and possibilities. The first painting was basically in black and white. I layered one color after another, using a drawknife to scratch the lines repeatedly. I was hoping to get the same contrasting effect as the pencil sketch; however, when I finished the painting, it looked like a patch of texture board. To give it some emotion, I painted a wide yellow curve that contrasted with the fine straight mono-color lines. I believed yellow was the right choice because it is one of the primary colors, but not like red, which contains too much enthusiasm, or blue, which stands for sorrow. Yellow is bright, intense, eager; similar characteristics of the essence of a dream. Later, yellow became one of the most important colors in my final work. To develop the color and line drawing, I also did a painting using bright yellow and orange-pink as the main colors, with white lines on the top layer.

After all the models were done and gathered together on my bench, they shaped the space as a particular emotional environment. Between the solid lines of the metal model and flat lines of the paintings, there was an invisible rhyme. It was hard to define which aspect represented which meaning; at that moment, I could only follow my instinct. My first idea was to magnify the painting and metal installation to human size, as size is an important element of art presentation. I think size builds up the physical relationship between viewers and a work. As Robert Mangold said, “. . . this scale has a limit . . . I like the idea of painting being related to human size, to human space and human walls, not something that is overpowering in relation to human scale, nor something that’s too small . . .” I decided to begin with the small metal installation first.

I began with a 22” x 28” frame. The material was affordable and the work would not be considered too narrow. My idea was to make a sculpture that looked like a hand drawing. Also, that size was close to the scale of an A3 print.

In the beginning, I used steel wires to form lines. My first metal work was quite flat. Steel wire is hard and not solderable; I tried using an electronic solderer, found that the solder couldn’t hold, and finally switched to welding. Although the wire was cleanly



Small patches of painting test

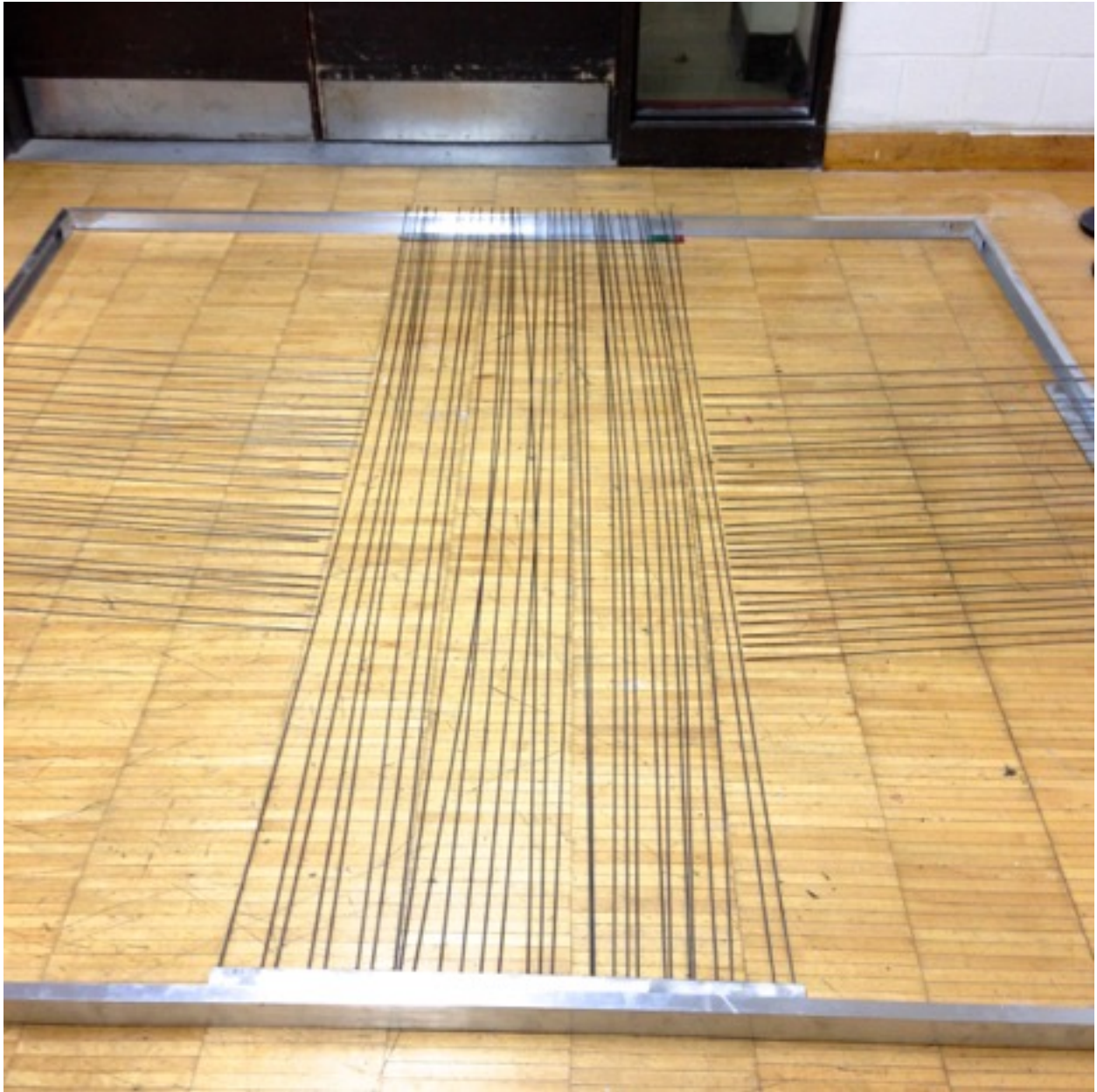
straight, the first work didn't fully match my expectation. My professor suggested that I change the material, so I began to use iron wire, which was softer and easier to form. It turned out that the shape of the iron wire was closer to the previous metal model and had the same element as the hand drawing. While exploring the possibility of using iron wire, I realized the idea of shaping a three-dimensional work is better than doing a plane one. This was an exciting discovery. I made the next two pieces three-dimensional. However, I faced the question of what to do with the previous two flat steel works. Obviously, they were not as good as the latter two. At that moment, I noticed that in the art of creation, there's a cost to the process. The creator sometimes has to give up or remake the immature work to keep the final presentation clean and professional. Because of the time and cost limit, I couldn't do the extra two works, so I choose to re-do a previous work by taking off one part and adding other parts. The other work I would leave as a reference to the stages of development.

On the other hand, paintings were the other half of “Dreamland.” With the inspiration from Robert Smithson, I chose to put a mirror into my painting. My first idea was to paint on the mirror itself; however, a 4” x 4” mirror was pricey. Also, the acrylic pigments might shed from the glass. As a compromise, I chose to set the mirror as part of the painting. The effect I wanted was for viewers to see themselves in the painting, to be involved in the work. I tried different kinds of gesso and media to see the various possibilities of texture and coating. A mixture of plaster powder and matte gesso gave the painting a rough and thick quality. The thickness helped to make the shape clearer when I scratched the lines out of the painting. In some parts, I added sand to give the surface a bit of glint, so the paintings would have an intriguing texture.

The keynote in the paintings was simple, but not plain. Black and white are the simplest colors. All other colors stand for emotion. Dream is a sentimental, but blurry idea. We may experience strong emotion in a dream, but we can hardly remember the details in dreamland. When we try to recall the dream after we wake up, everything seems to be opaque. Following this angle, I layered the color first and covered it with black or white. Actually, the so-called “black” was not really black, but deep purple or blue. I think true black stands for something, certainly, but nothing can be certain in a dream. In the later two paintings, including the large one, white and yellow are the prime colors. As I mentioned before, I thought yellow was an aggressive color, the color of desire. All the things about dream were based on desire. In this way, yellow was very important in *Dreamland*.

After all of the small metal work and paintings were done, the big metal work was my greatest concern. My professors and I had many conversations on the technical part of building this work: what was the most suitable metal, how to assemble and disassemble each part, how to install the entire work to match the other works in the exhibition, etc. Finally, we chose to use U-channel-shaped aluminum as the outside frame, because aluminum is relatively light-weight, but is also hard. We used screws and right-angle-shaped aluminum plate to join the four edges. For the inside, I decided to use 8” steel wires. I soldered them on the steel plates and screwed the steel plates to the aluminum frame.

Aluminum frame



IV. Conclusion

During the exhibition, I saw some people were confused. They wondered why a metal craft student made a thesis exhibition with paintings and installation works. I knew it was not normal. However, my understanding is that everything we pursue is about art, and making art is the final goal. The skill which we choose to study is just like a tool. To make the art or present art, we need to learn certain skills, but it doesn't mean that we have to make art that can only be presented with those skills. For me, *Dreamland*: was the idea I wanted to present, and I would only choose the right way to display it. My area of study should not restrict my imagination.

As I mentioned, my idea of representing Dreamland was creating a semi-closed environment, an environment which was quiet, clean, and isolated. Dreamland reflects our inner world; however, even we can't see that world clearly most of the time. As Freud said, the superego suppresses the id, and people's instinctual desires are hidden from them. In my work, I used black and white to paint over a color layer. Because colors stand for emotions, black and white are the only colors that have no bias. Using them to cover the hue underneath was to isolate the viewer from the emotions of the painting. This is similar to how we experience a dream: We experience some unnamed emotion, but can't give a clear definition on how it comes to us, where it ends or when the dream ends.

As for the colors underneath, they are mainly blue with a bit of light pink, and the only color above the white cover is yellow. In my understanding, the ultimate wish to dream is either unfinished nostalgia of faulty past, or fancying about the activeness of the future. The former is the sorrowful memory, the latter, the aggressive attempt. Dream is all about memory. One dream can have early memory—which we thought we had forgotten after we wake up—and present memory working at the same time. Blue is the sorrowful color, standing for nostalgia, while the yellow stands for intention. So I masked the blue, just as our ego chooses to forget the unchangeable past, so that we won't be tortured by regret. However, those memories are strong; they still exist in our id and will keep trying to pass the censor in order to reach our dreams from time to time. Through the scratched lines on the surface, viewers can see part of the blue, and they may fantasize more blue underneath. Unlike the attitude towards the past, people can usually sense when the sign of their intentions for the future shows in a dream. For this

reason, yellow is the only color I put above the white. The sharp parallelogram I painted on the center of the big painting implies the core of the dream—the desire, which is sharp and striking.

Although Dreamland is a common idea and was shaped from my point of view, I wanted viewers to see themselves in my work as well. Therefore, I used mirrors in my work. In an ideal world, I would use a mirror to cover the half space of a wall and paint on the other half. However, this was not feasible for my exhibition. Initially, I was worried that if I put a small mirror in the painting, the whole thing would look like a home decoration. So when I was doing the painting, I didn't deliberately avoid painting within the mirror, but treated the mirror as part of the canvas. It turned out that the thin hazy traces left by the brush on the mirror's surface gave the entire work a misty look. When viewers first see the painting, they probably don't notice there's a mirror behind the color. And when they get closer, they can see themselves as a part of the figure in the painting. But the reflected figure and the real person are isolated by the painting. It was similar to how in the dreamland we sometimes stand in the first person perspective, sometimes in the third person. I always felt it was very strange to see the "other" me behaving in the dream. I knew that person was me, but if so, who was I at that moment? The purpose of the mirror was to convey this paradox to viewers.

Dreamland contains various bizarre moments and the conjunct parts may be seen as totally irrelevant. But the appearance of those wacky moments is mostly caused by dream's censorship. In bypassing the censor, the dream maker has to deconstruct an original idea, and hide chips in different corners in dreamland. When trying to interpret a dream, one must dig out each chip from the piles of the dream's content and rearrange them in logical order. I think that, as a part of psychological activity, dream is formed with its own logic. In my work, I used lines to express the idea of logic. Line is an important element that runs through the whole process in Dreamland, especially in the metal installation works. I personally think small metal works are the best expression of the concept of logic. The lines in Dreamland might look like line drawings from a distance, but when viewers step forward they will notice the works are solid. With light from different angles, the lines' shadows on the wall will also change. The three-dimensional arrangements of the lines give the work different looks from different viewing areas. With these possibilities, the metal works become a fun idea rather than stereotypical front-faced wall art. I have said that the lines symbolize logic because logic is like a lens through which we comprehend the world. However, just as coins have different sides, people see the world differently from different angles. In the same way,

viewers will see the lines interlace with differing effects. That's how reality is projected in our dreams, and it can never be predicted.

In conclusion, *Dreamland* is a very meaningful project for me. I tried something that I had always wanted to do, such as a contemporary painting and large-scale metal work. I had almost never spent such a long time discovering and exploring an idea. In creating this project, I saw my weakness in the area of persistence. At the same time, it also proved there is no end to one idea: Its only end comes when the artist chooses to stop. My work on Dreamland has reached a stopping point. It represents the current stage of my understanding of dreams and art expression and will grow with time. I will continue thinking about it to see what will evolve from *Dreamland*.

V. **Documentation of the work**



Logic 1

Metal Installation work / sculpture

Media: Steel, iron, paint



Logic 2

Metal Installation work / sculpture

Media: Steel, iron, paint



Logic 3

Metal Installation work / sculpture

Media: Steel, iron, paint



Cageling

Acrylic painting

Media: Acrylic

Untitled

Metal installation

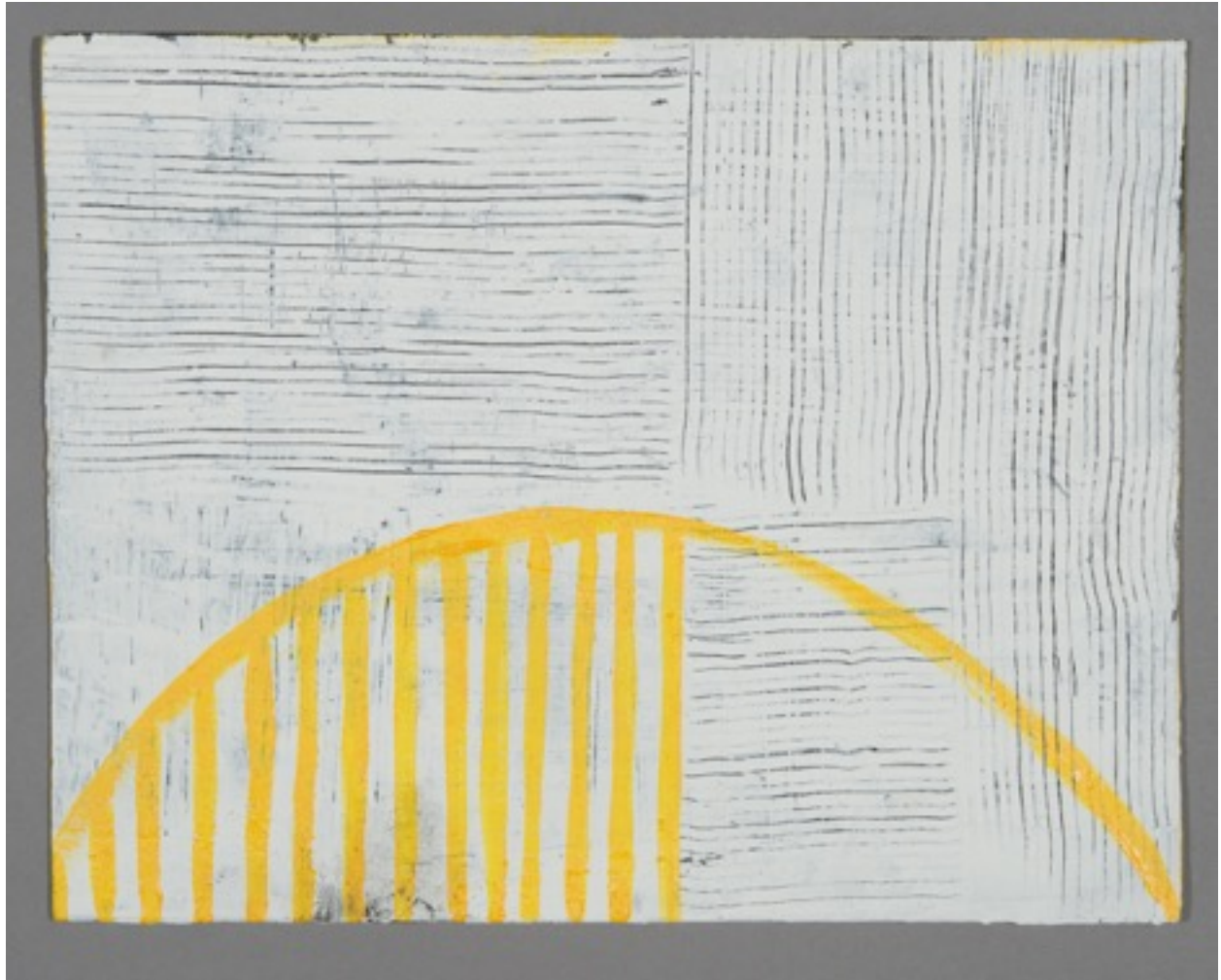


Media: Aluminum, steel, paint

Though the mist

Acrylic painting

Media: Acrylic, mirror



Untitled

Acrylic painting

Media: Acrylic



Piercing

Acrylic painting

Media: Acrylic



Reflectionism

Acrylic painting

Media: Acrylic, steel



Floating moon

Acrylic painting

Media: Acrylic, mirror



Untitled

Acrylic painting

Media: Acrylic



Logic 4

Metal installation work / Sculpture

Media: Steel, paint